Dionysus versus the Crucified

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Dionysus versus the Crucified

René Girard

For a while, after the war, a great debate raged about Nietzsche's own responsibility in the Nazi exploitation of his writing for anti-Semitic purposes. There was mostly silence, however, regarding his anti-Christian stance; it is too explicit and consistent to be denied.

To those who felt that Nietzsche's work should not fall into neglect, the point was irrelevant anyway. Why should Nietzsche be exonerated from an attitude that a majority of intellectuals regarded as sound? No apology needed to be made.

No apology was made. Nietzsche was in the clear. But the anti-Christian polemics of Nietzsche has received scant attention since World War II. Why? If they were asked,—they never are—contemporary Nietzscheans would probably answer that their thinker's passionate attitude toward religion has lost its relevance.

Nietzsche remains "important" because of some avatars of his that came to light in recent years, mostly through the ingenuity of French critics, Nietzsche the genealogist, Nietzsche the advocate of "free play," Nietzsche the exponent of counter-culture. . . .

Different as they are from one another, at least in some respects, these avatars are all alike in their indifference to the great struggle that obsessed the last lucid years of Nietzsche. Is there some obscure reason why this should be? Is there something inopportune or embarrassing about the theme; is it strategically advisable not to insist upon it?

Whatever the case may be, Nietzsche's religious problematic was already marginalized when the French critics began their work.

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The real job was performed by Martin Heidegger. Even those who reject the interpretation of Nietzsche as the last great metaphysician of the West, are dependent on Heidegger for their evacuation of "Dionysus versus the Crucified." Just as existentialism in the French style was an offshoot of German philosophy and above all Heidegger, the new "French Nietzsche" is another lively mouse, or rather a whole litter, brought forth by the Heideggerian mountain.

Nietzsche's forced conversion to inverted platonism is rooted in one essential Heideggerian tenet, which is the mutual incompatibility of religion and thought in the highest sense, the post-philosophical and Heideggerian sense.

Everything in Nietzsche that comes under the heading: *Dionysus versus the Crucified* must be alien to "thought" and is therefore harshly condemned as a pure and simple "return to monotheism," the very reverse in other words of what Nietzsche himself imagined he was doing. This condemnation is also an allusion to the fact that someone fighting Christianity with the passionate intensity of Nietzsche must still have been under its influence. Even though brief flashes of hatred appear here and there in his writings, Heidegger on the whole gives an impression of radical indifference to religion, an attitude that has become a model for quite a few people. The subject is of little or no interest. Period.

Heidegger interpreted monotheism as a monopolistic claim on the divine that constituted, in his eyes, the height of *ressentiment.* I will be the last to disagree with Heidegger regarding the importance of *ressentiment* in Nietzsche's work. I do not believe, however, that Heidegger or anyone else can disentangle the strands that belong to *ressentiment* and therefore to religious non-thought from the strands that do not and belong therefore to the philosophical thought that deserves to be considered and interpreted.

To Heidegger, "Dionysus versus the Crucified" was merely the Nietzschean reversal of a previous Christian formula: "The Crucified versus Dionysus," and therefore the same empty struggle for power between two rival religions. As institutional Christianity weakens, the philosophical hostility to it turns to silence but it does not decrease.

To Heidegger, the essential history of our world is post-philosophical and religion is irrelevant. The Nietzsche of "Dionysus versus the Crucified" is more alien to the real issues of our times

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than the "withdrawal of being" and its comet tail of post-philosophical discourse. Is this view going to prevail?

Even from the standpoint of Nietzschean studies in the narrowest sense, this negative attitude is a mutilation. It deprives us of what is really exciting and novel in the Nietzschean corpus. Now that we are no longer limited to the excerpts carefully selected and organized by Nietzsche's sister, and we can read all of the formerly unpublished writing, we cannot doubt that the closer we get to the end the more obsessive the Christian theme becomes with Nietzsche. The number and importance of the fragments dealing with the subject increase. . . We are reminded of a volcano pouring greater and greater torrents of murky lava with, here and there, the sparkle of a jewel still untouched by human hands . . . ; for these some of us at least would gladly burn one finger or two.

Here, the most daring material becomes inseparable from the grotesque. Genius and insanity lend each other a hand until the last instant, giving the lie to the orthodox thesis that disconnects the two. If we receive the evidence of their mutual contamination, we commit the one unforgivable sin, punishable by immediate exclusion from the club of the respectable Nietzscheans.

These later fragments are the height of *ressentiment* in the sense that the final breakdown also is. Nietzsche's superiority over his century and ours may well be that he alone pushed the *ressentiment* that he shares with quite a few lesser mortals to such a height that it yielded its most virulent and significant fruit. None of Nietzsche's achievements as a thinker can be divorced from *ressentiment,* whether the subject is Wagner, the divine or Nietzsche himself in *Ecce Homo.*

Unlike Heidegger, unlike most of his contemporaries and ours, Nietzsche strongly believed in the unique specificity of the biblical and Christian perspective. His reasons cannot be dismissed as summarily as they would if he were a Christian. The ethnocentric fallacy will not do.

The uniqueness of the Bible and the New Testament is affirmed by Nietzsche in a context directly opposed to Christian apologetics. Nietzsche tried to put his critique of Christianity on a basis less shaky than the one that was already standardized in his time, the great positivistic equivalence of all religious traditions. He knew too much about pagan mythology not to be revolted by the shallow assimilation of the Judeo-Christian with the pagan.

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He maintained that the Christian spirit tries to stifle "life" by repressing the most dynamic individuals of a culture. This is the famous "morality of the slaves" versus "the morality of the masters," the one thing everybody knows about the Nietzschean distinction between paganism and Judeo-Christianity.

A culture has to pay a price in order to breed a class of higher men. It has to assume even the worst forms of violence. Time and time again, Nietzsche tells us that Dionysus accommodates all human passions, including the lust to annihilate, the most ferocious appetite for destruction. Dionysus says yes to the sacrifice of many human lives, including, not so paradoxically, those of the highest type that is being bred in the process.

Already in *The Birth of Tragedy,* Nietzsche mentioned the violence that accompanies and often precedes Dionysus everywhere. All epiphanies of the god leave ruins in their wake. *Mania,* after all, means homicidal fury. Unlike many of his followers, Nietzsche did not turn the Dionysian into something idyllic and inconsequential. He was too honest to dissimulate the disturbing, the ugly sides of the Dionysian.

With the years, his references to that frenzied and seemingly haphazard violence that marks all the episodes of the Dionysian saga became even more frequent and insistent than in the past, but Nietzsche often repeated them almost verbatim, and they became stereotyped.

Nietzsche never went into an analysis in depth of *The Bacchae* for instance, but he always dutifully mentioned the Dionysian violence. The reason for this is not that Nietzsche particularly relished that violence; the opposite is true but this violence plays an essential role and it should not be suppressed.

Nietzsche clearly saw that pagan mythology, like pagan ritual, centers on the killing of victims or on their expulsion, which can seem perfectly wanton. He realized that this type of killing, which is reflected in many rituals as well as represented in myths, is often executed by a large number of murderers; it is a collective deed in which an entire human group is involved. Only exceptionally, but then most strikingly, as we will see later, did Nietzsche focus his attention directly on the collective aspect of the god's murder but his entire problematic depends on this and his most interesting fragments clearly demonstrate that need. This is the case, especially, of a well-known text that figures in *The Will to Power* under the number 1052.

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Nietzsche himself gave that important text a title: *The two types: Dionysus and the Crucified.* The second paragraph formulates most clearly the attitude of Nietzsche:

> Dionysus versus the "Crucified": there you have the antithesis. It is *not* a difference in regard to their martyrdom—it is a difference in the meaning of it. Life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence, creates torment, destruction, the will to annihilation. In the other case, suffering—the "Crucified as the innocent one"—counts as an objection to this life, as a formula for its condemnation.—One will see that the problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning. In the former case, it is supposed to be the path to a holy existence; in the latter case, being is counted as *holy enough* to justify even a monstrous amount of suffering. The tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering . . . Dionysus cut to pieces is a *promise* of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction.

Nietzsche obviously felt that the collective murder of Dionysus, in the episode of the Titans, is analogous enough to the passion of Jesus to be regarded as equivalent. There is a difference between the two but "It is *not* a difference in regard to their martyrdom." The italics are Nietzsche's.

The insight regarding the similarity of the two collective deaths is not uncommon among thinkers and anthropologists of the period. It is the insight of *Totem and Taboo* as well. It has disappeared from modern anthropology, lost and buried beneath the fast accumulating rubble of scholarly fashion. The structuralist analyst, for instance, is still concerned with the episode of the Titans in the Dionysus saga but his interest has shifted from the murder of the god and the cannibalistic feast to the culinary preparation that took place inbetween, an interesting question no doubt but one that diverts us from the tragic apprehension of Nietzsche.

When the anthropologists first observed the great abundance of gods collectively murdered in religious cults everywhere, they felt they had discovered something important and so did Nietzsche, obviously. This insight provided students of religion with a powerful focus for comparative analysis. There is no sacrificial religion without a drama at the center, and the more closely you observe it, the more you discover that the features common to the *martyrdom* of Dionysus and Jesus are also common to an immeasurable number of other cults not only in Greek or Indo-European religions but in the entire world.

This remarkable similarity is one important reason why the later

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Nietzsche can resort to a single symbol, Dionysus, for countless mythological cults. To say that Dionysus stands for some kind of non-biblical monotheism is a little ludicrous really and unworthy of Heidegger.

Even though anthropologists never discovered why all these cults had that collective drama as a center, they felt entitled to draw some preliminary conclusions from its constant presence. They were positivists, of course, men who believed in facts and nothing but hard facts.

If the facts are the same in all these cults, it can be safely assumed, or so they thought, that these religions must be the same. And this element of sameness is obviously present in the Judaic religion with its ritual sacrifices, and even more spectacularly in the Christian religion. The passion of Jesus certainly constitutes the heart of the gospels, and what is it if not one more instance of these collective murders that are the daily bread of religions all over the world?

This point was made in almost all great works of religious anthropology between 1850 and World War I. Even today it remains the hidden basis and principal argument, at least potentially, for what has become a popular cliché regarding the many religions of mankind. All of them are "more or less alike."

Although, or rather because Nietzsche shared this comparative insight regarding collective murder and sacrifice, he refrained from the habitual conclusion. The only other thinker who also did, at least up to a point, was Freud.

Nietzsche rejected that conclusion because he was no positivist. He knew that the "facts" mean nothing unless and until they are interpreted. The martyrdom of Dionysus is interpreted by the adepts of his cult in a manner quite different from the Christian interpretation of Jesus' passion.

In the case of Jesus, the emphasis lies on the *innocence* of the victim and, as a consequence, on the guilt of his murderers. One could object that Dionysus, too, was martyred wrongly and that the titans were just as guilty from the standpoint of the myth as the murderers of Jesus, and they must have been indeed, since they were destroyed by the thunder of Zeus.

Nietzsche did not even mention this objection because he saw its superficiality. In all the other episodes of the Dionysus cycle, there is a collective *diasparagmos,* a martyrdom similar to the martyrdom

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of Dionysus at the hands of the Titans. In all of these, however, the god is not the victim but the instigator of the mob lynching.

Every time Dionysus appears, a victim is dismembered and often devoured by his or her many murderers. The god can be the victim and he can also be the chief murderer. He can be victimized and he can be a victimizer. This change of roles, that also occurs in most primitive religions, clearly confirms what Nietzsche thought regarding the indifference of mythology toward biblical morality.

From the one episode in which Dionysus himself is the victim, one cannot conclude that the Dionysian as such condemns violence in the sense that the gospels do. It is inconceivable that Jesus could become the instigator of some "holy lynching." Each time the possibility of lynching occurs in the gospels, in the case, for instance, of the adulterous woman about to be stoned (Jn 8, 2-11), Jesus forestalls the violence and disperses the mob.

At some point, no doubt, with the orphic tradition, the murder of the little Dionysus became a symbol of the human propensity to evil, in a manner that could be said to approximate somewhat the Christian view of the passion, but this view was completely alien to the Dionysus that Nietzsche opposed to "the Crucified." It is a reinterpretation of the old myth that must have occurred under the influence of the Bible.

There are two types of religion, according to Nietzsche. The first one, the pagan, understands that "life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence, creates torment, destruction, the will to annihilate," and it says yes to all this; it assumes willingly the worst together with the best. It is beyond good and evil. "It affirms even the harshest suffering" as Nietzsche puts it.

The second type of religion rejects this same suffering, Nietzsche thought. It is interesting that Nietzsche would have condemned Christianity for rejecting suffering. The habitual criticism is that Christianity encourages suffering. Nietzsche saw clearly that Jesus died not as a sacrificial victim of the Dionysian type, but against all such sacrifices. Nietzsche accused this death of being a hidden act of *ressentiment* because it reveals the injustice of all such deaths and the "absurdity" not of one specific mob only but of all "dionysian" mobs the world over. The world "absurdity" is Nietzsche's own.

When Nietzsche keeps repeating that the passion of Jesus is "an objection to life," or "a formula for its condemnation," he understands that the Christian passion is a rejection and an indictment

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of everything upon which the old pagan religions were founded and with them all human societies worth their salt, in Nietzsche's estimation, the societies in which "the strong and the victorious" were not prevented by the down-trodden masses from enjoying the fruits of their superiority.

Nietzsche, in short, espoused the common ethnological understanding of his time regarding the presence of violence at the heart of most religious cults but he rejected the positivistic conclusion that puts all these cults in the same bag. He singled out the biblical and the Christian not because Jesus' martyrdom is different but because it is not. It has to be the same for that martyrdom of Jesus to be an explicit allusion to the genesis of all pagan religions and a silent but definitive condemnation of pagan order, of all human order really.

The Christian passion is not anti-Jewish as the vulgar antisemites believe; it is anti-pagan; it reinterprets religious violence in such a negative fashion as to make its perpetrators feel guilty for committing it, even for silently accepting it. Since all human culture is grounded in this collective violence, the whole human race is declared guilty from the standpoint of the gospels. Life itself is slandered because life cannot continue and organize itself without this type of violence.

The Jewish Bible, the Old Testament of the Christians, is similar to the New in respect to the issue discussed in fragment 1052. A positivistic anthropologist sees no real difference between the Romulus story and the Cain story. In both stories, a brother kills his brother and a human community is founded. The data of the stories are the same but in the Bible, the interpretation is unique. It is not the same thing to interpret the same murder as a glorious deed with the Romans and to interpret it as a crime with the Bible.

In the Bible, the story of Cain is symbolical not of one human society only but of many. It is a statement about human culture in general. And it may be more pertinent than all other discussions of anthropological origins. Either the vast number of brothers killing brothers and other similar crimes in innumerable founding myths signifies nothing at all, or it points to a violent origin of human society passively reflected and assumed by mythological cultures whereas it is denounced and rejected by the Bible and the Christian gospels.

All mythological heroes are fundamentally the same. If you call them Cain, however, your interpretation of mythology is not the

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same as if you call them Dionysus. Nietzsche is not satisfied with ignoring the Bible in the sense that his time is beginning to do, he is trying to reverse it and to rehabilitate the violence of Cain.

Cain, Romulus and Dionysus commit the same deed and, from the standpoint of the gospels, they must be given the same name. It is not the name of a monotheistic god but the name of the one "who was a murderer from the beginning" (Jn 8, 44), Satan, a word that really means the false accuser, whereas the *Paraclete,* the Holy Spirit of the Christians, really means the lawyer for the defense, the one who turns all martyrs into witnesses to the truth of the gospels, therefore to the untruth of their own violent deaths.

All four gospels explicitly link the innocent death of Jesus to the death of all previous collective victims beginning with "Abel the Just." The violence of Cain is part of a long chain of murders that leads to the passion conceived as a return of the same reenacted, this time, in the full light of a revelation that spells the doom of "the prince of this world," or "the powers of this world," or "the celestial powers." All this refers to the end of the type of society grounded in the Dionysian attitude, in the docile acceptance of the scapegoat process and of its violence.

We do not have to share Nietzsche's value judgment to appreciate his understanding of the irreconcilable opposition between the Bible and mythology, his disgust with the bland eclecticism that dissolves all sharp issues and dominates the atheism of our time, as well as its vague and shapeless religiosity.

Nietzsche is a marvelous antidote to all fundamentally anti-biblical efforts to turn mythology into a kind of Bible, and that is the enterprise of all the Jungians of this world, or to dissolve the Bible into mythology, and that is the enterprise of more or less everybody else.

You find nothing in Nietzsche that recalls the saccharine idealization of primitive culture that began at the end of the 18th century and that we have so successfully revived. At the very height of the great syncretic mishmash of modernity, Nietzsche drew attention to the irreconcilable opposition between a mythological vision grounded in the perspective of the victimizers and a biblical inspiration that from the beginning tends to side with the victims and produces not only very different results from the ethical but also from the intellectual standpoint.

Nietzsche's value judgment is untenable. Pious efforts to exonerate the thinker from the consequences of his own thinking are

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misguided. It is undeniable that he himself extended the scope of this judgment to political and ethical questions in a manner that can only provide encouragement to the worst ideological abberations.

Hundreds of texts can be quoted that show beyond all doubt that Nietzsche's fierce stubbornness in opposing the inspiration of the Bible in favor of victims, logically and inexorably led him toward the more and more inhuman attitudes of his later years which he espoused, in words of course rather than in deeds, with a fortitude worthy of a better cause.

There is a tendency for critics to play hide and seek with the later writings of Nietzsche. It would be more interesting to investigate the inner compulsion that has led so many intellectuals to adopt inhuman standards in the last two centuries. No one exemplifies this tendency with the perfection that Nietzsche does. *Ressentiment* has to be part of the picture of course. One essential thing about *ressentiment* is that its ultimate target is always *ressentiment* itself, its own mirror image, under a slightly different mask that makes it unrecognizable.

Ressentiment is the interiorization of weakened vengeance. Nietzsche suffers so much from it that he mistakes it for the original and primary form of vengeance. He sees *ressentiment* not merely as the child of Christianity which it certainly is but also as its father which it certainly is not.

Ressentiment flourishes in a world where real vengeance (Dionysus) has been weakened. The Bible and the gospels have diminished the violence of vengeance and turned it to *ressentiment* not because they originate in the latter but because their real target is vengeance in all its forms, and they have only succeeded in wounding vengeance, not in eliminating it. The gospels are indirectly responsible; we alone are directly responsible. *Ressentiment* is the manner in which the spirit of vengeance survives the impact of Christianity and turns the gospels to its own use.

Nietzsche was less blind to the role of vengeance in human culture than most people of his time, but nevertheless there was blindness in him. He analyzed *ressentiment* and all its works with enormous power. He did not see that the evil he was fighting was a relatively minor evil compared to the more violent forms of vengeance.

His insight was partly blunted by the deceptive quiet of his post-Christian society. He could afford the luxury of resenting *ressenti-*

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ment so much that it appeared as a fate worse than real vengeance. Being absent from the scene, real vengeance was never seriously apprehended. Unthinkingly, like so many thinkers of his age and ours, Nietzsche called on Dionysus, begging him to bring back real vengeance as a cure for what seemed to him the worst of all possible fates, *ressentiment.*

Such frivolity could only flourish in our privileged centuries, in privileged parts of the world where real vengeance had retreated so much that its terror had become unintelligible. But sincere prayers are never in vain, and the prayers of those who desired the return of vengeance have finally been heard.

Real vengeance is back among us in the shape of nuclear and other absolute weapons, reducing our planet to the size of a global primitive village, terrified once again by the possibility of unlimited bloodfeud. Real vengeance is so awesome that even the most vengeful men do not dare to unleash it, knowing perfectly well that all the dreadful things they can do unto their enemies, their enemies can also do unto them.

Compared to this, *ressentiment* and other 19th-century annoyances pale to insignificance, or rather their only significance is the increasing rage everywhere that turns *ressentiment* back into irrepressible vengeance and can unleash the unspeakable.

At more and more levels of reality, the urgency of the gospel message can no longer be disregarded with impunity. Those thinkers who, like Nietzsche, unthinkingly appealed to real vengeance in their itch to get rid of *ressentiment* resemble these foolish characters in fairytales who make the wrong wish and come to grief when it comes true.

This can be interpreted as a warning of sorts. But this warning can and is disregarded with impunity by almost everybody. Most people go on spouting 19th-century ideas as if the return of real vengeance in our world were not an accomplished fact. The truth is that, for the time being at least, real vengeance has a power of dissuasion such that, concretely, nothing has changed. The very enormity of the threat protects us from the threatened violence. *Ressentiment* is intense enough to generate more and more intellectual nihilism but not intense enough so far to annihilate real being.

Real vengeance has not yet concretely demonstrated its power upon our lives and it never will, in a sense, because if it did, there would be no more lives to be affected by anything. There would

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be no one left to acknowledge the return of absolute vengeance as the real event of our time.

As a result one can go on thinking frivolously and pretending today that Nietzsche makes sense as a teacher of ethics, or of history, or as a philosopher, or as a guide for some kind of "lifestyle," or whatever. This cannot fail to sound more futile and unreal with each passing year. The price to be paid for this is the price any historical era must pay for avoiding its real issues, a certain barrenness of the spirit and a growing sterility in all its "cultural activities."

Our military men love to give mythological names to their nuclear missiles, Pluto, Poseidon, Ariadne, and the like. Too bad they never resorted to Dionysus himself but it really does not matter. Those who understand do not need such literalness and it would not make any impression on those who do not understand. The contemporary use of mythology is more profound than all the mythological games of our philosophers since the Renaissance.

Even though Nietzsche had ceased writing long before his espousal of mythological violence began to reveal its frivolous side, there was something in him that fiercely resisted his own wager. When studying "Dionysus *versus* the Crucified," we should place the emphasis also on that *versus*. We can hear in it an echo of the fierce battle Nietzsche fought and finally lost in his effort to insure the revenge of Dionysus over the Crucified. We can also hear these echoes in the inhuman aspects of Nietzsche's writing at the time, in the obligation he imposed upon himself to justify even the worst forms of oppression and persecution.

There is a universal wager nowadays against the biblical principle regarded as intrinsically perverse rather than as perverted by the enormous human ingenuity in the service of this perversion. This wager cannot be sustained without some form of the sacred, and it has to be that violent sacred which Nietzsche calls Dionysus. Even though Heidegger also detected the presence of violence in it, he too, glorified the primitive *sacred.* He looked forward to future epiphanies of it and did not anticipate any particular problems with this violence even though he was writing about this after the end of World War II.

In his later years, Nietzsche kept reviving, glorifying and modernizing more and more sinister aspects of the primitive sacred. I am convinced that this process became more intolerable as it became more radical and it led to his final breakdown.

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The greatness of Nietzsche is that he committed himself totally to that process and he paid for his commitment literally with his life. For things to come to such a pass, the forces on both sides had to be almost evenly balanced. As the prophets would say: "It is a dreadful fate to fall into the hands of the living God."

Paradoxically, Nietzsche is the one thinker in the modern world whose work did achieve something that the Christian thinkers have always failed to achieve. They have never dared. He put his finger on that "sword" that Jesus said he brought, the sword destructive of human culture, that sword no human being can fail to dread and resent even though—or is it because?—it belongs to what Pascal calls *l'ordre de la charité.*

This force destroys the old sacred through the revelation of its violent nature, but so far, it has only managed to wound it, turning it into a fierce monster that now threatens to devour us all. Mimetic doubles are everywhere in that cosmic battle and it is tempting to see nothing else, nothing but empty mimetic rivalry in the opposition between Dionysus and the Crucified.

This is what Heidegger did. Heidegger, here, was still the voice of a modern demystification that exposes so many false differences that in the end it misses the one and only difference that is real.

Heidegger fought on the same side as Nietzsche, no doubt, the side of the old sacred, but on positions less exposed, less forward, less dangerous and revealing than Nietzsche's. He has succeeded, at least for a while, in neutralizing the "imprudence" of Nietzsche in the domain of religion. With time, it will become easier and easier to realize that, before exploding into the hands of its maker, this machine was producing the opposite of what it was built for, the glorification of what is was supposed to vilify, the vilification of what it was supposed to celebrate.

For quite a few years, I have emphasized the role of collective violence in the genesis of the primitive sacred and the role of the Bible in the increasing intelligibility of that genesis. My purpose in the present essay is to show that Nietzsche is deeply but paradoxically involved in that process.

The present effort will probably meet with skepticism. Many readers will suspect that I am projecting upon Nietzsche a preoccupation too idiosyncratic to yield significant results. This attempt has to result not in a mutilation of what Nietzsche "really thought" (which does not seem to matter anymore and cannot be reached

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in any case), but in a revelation of the real fecundity of Nietzsche's work, his possible contribution to the critical formulae currently fashionable.

The general reaction to the theme of *the collective murder of God* resembles the bewilderment and amused condescension that greeted the Nietzschean madman when he addressed his contemporaries in the market place. This anonymous lunatic

> lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market and cried incessantly, "I seek God, I seek God!" As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Why, did he get lost? said one. Did he lose his way like a child? said another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated? Thus they yelled and laughed.

This is the beginning of the most famous text in *The Gay Science,* aphorism 125. Even today, especially today perhaps, whoever touches upon this untouchable subject, *the collective murder of God,* finds himself in a position curiously reminiscent of the one described here. After more than a century, nothing has really changed, especially in those academic circles that did not appreciate Nietzsche at the time any more than he appreciated them.

My readers are too careful with texts, too erudite, attentive, deliberate, thorough and above all too shrewd, too good as readers of texts to be scandalized, or even surprised when they see me appropriate this text in the informal fashion that I just did. They certainly would not dispute my right to do this. They have kept in mind the extraordinary similarity of content if not of form, between my somewhat tiresome insistence on the religious significance of the collective murder and the parallel insistence of this enigmatic text.

Here is the first proclamation of the madman:

> "Whither is God" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea . . . ?

Since the late 18th century, from Jean-Paul to Victor Hugo and beyond, pronouncements regarding the death of God have multiplied with each passing year, and belated prophets are now forming what is probably the largest crowd ever gathered in our intellectual history. What everybody has been announcing, of

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course, is that the biblical god is dying of old age. It is a more or less natural death in other words.

Most people believe that Nietzsche's text refers exclusively to modern atheism. This is part of the story, no doubt, but only a part, and an enigmatic part already because it rejects very pointedly the very notion everybody is trying to find there, the notion of God as something childish and meaningless really that men gradually learned to do without in the modern age, as they became more "mature" and learned about electricity, and now computers.

Instead of that gradual fading away of God, with no particular violence or drama, Nietzsche sees the disappearance of God as a horrible murder in which every man is involved: "*We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers."

"If God never existed, if there is no such thing as God, how could he be killed?" That is the question only the uninformed reader dares to ask and, as usual with great texts, it is a much smarter one than all the "informed" philosophical questions.

Gods do not have to exist really in order to be murdered. As a matter of fact, unless they are first murdered they will never exist. Unlike ordinary beings who can exist only if they are not murdered, gods begin to exist as gods, at least in the eyes of men, only after they have been murdered.

In the entire text, the hackneyed expression "God is dead," appears in one passage only, and it is followed by an insistent return upon the theme of the collective murder of God, as if Nietzsche suddenly realized the difference between the hackneyed conception of God's "death" as a spectacle passively watched and the active deed he had in mind, the collective crime that seems to come from nowhere.

And he seems to have felt that the collective crime was the more powerful idea but harder to communicate, an idea indeed that would be resisted and eluded with the utmost energy. More emphasis was needed, therefore, and Nietzsche provided it, including even a gory description of the collective murder of God:

> God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?

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The first two sentences are all we have in that text that resembles the old "God is dead" theme. But this is enough of an excuse for all the commentators to seize upon it and substitute once more the harmless cliché for what Nietzsche is really saying. The references to the blood, and to the knife, and to the wiping of the blood, forcefully take us back to the first announcement of the madman. God did not die a natural death; he was collectively killed.

And the crime is so great that new festivals of atonement, new sacred games will have to be invented. New rituals will undoubtedly appear. The consequences of God's murder are religious, therefore, purely religious. The very deed that seems to put an end to the religious process is really the origin of that process, the sum total of it, really, the religious process par excellence. These new festivals and sacred games will certainly reenact the collective murder of God. They will be sacrificial rites. The death of God is also his birth.

If God is always the product of his own collective murder, does not this text really say that the death of the gods is their life and that the life of the gods is their death? What kind of eternal return of religion is this? Can Nietzsche himself account for all this?

When it comes to what everybody improperly calls the death of God, the only text that is ever quoted is this one but no reference is ever made to the substitution of God's murder for the earlier peaceful death. Is it not strange?

On "the death of God" this is only one text among many but it is the most memorable. Unquestionably, the element of novelty in it stems from the replacement of death by murder. And yet, when the admirers of that text refer to it, they always label it as the greatest text on the death of God. They always substitute their own concept of God's death for the more mysterious murder of Nietzsche.

The aura of this text is inseparable from its dramatic power and here as in Greek tragedy and everywhere else, dramatic power is rooted in the collective murder of God. The genius of Nietzsche takes him to the real beginning.

Perfectly respectable scholars, men who would not touch my own collective murder with a ten foot pole, quote Nietzsche's text in preference to any other, but their comments betray no awareness of the murder theme. They never seem to notice the strange little twist that makes this text different from all others, *even though it is this difference that determines their preference.*

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They see this difference as a purely *esthetic* difference, of course. The esthetic difference par excellence, I would add. When Nietzsche is quoted, a certain excitement is generated, even today. Quite innocently and unconsciously, of course, the collective murder of God becomes our own deed too. We are invited to partake in it. It is a kind of avant-garde version of the eucharist, a symbolic sacrifice that has not yet completely exhausted its ritual efficacy *because its significance is not perceived.* Some people have tried to transfer the efficacy of Nietzsche's text to the "death of man" and now the death of science, of truth, of almost everything, but they do not see that, each time, they should say murder and anyway, the sacred *pharmakon* has already evaporated.

Aphorism 125 functions in the same manner as the collective murder itself, which is now hidden behind the theme of an entirely "natural" and peaceful death, a radically undramatic death, a death "sans histoire." The text on the death of God, functions as one more murder of God as long as the theme of the murder remains unacknowledged. Even this textual epiphany of the divine is the product of a collective murder that the murderers are not aware of having committed. "This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—*and yet they have done it themselves.*"

Heidegger gave what is regarded by many as the "definitive" comment about that text. This essay is separate from his two-volume *Nietzsche,* and its title already spells out the effort to reinsert Nietzsche into a tradition from which this text secedes, a tradition to which Heidegger had really returned. The title is, of course, "Nietzsche's word, God is dead."

It is relevant to observe at this point that, except for his vocabulary, Heidegger's pronouncements on the future of the religious in general are a continuation of 19th-century historicism. Like Victor Hugo or any 19th-century idealist, Heidegger felt that the death of an exhausted religion, the biblical religion, would leave room for the *independent* birth of some new god, a birth that would not be rooted in the death of the hated biblical God.

Heidegger often spoke mysteriously of some god that should appear at some point in the future. When he was in the right mood, he would graciously extend the wondrous promise of some brand new divinity to his theologically minded admirers—he had quite a few—eagerly but respectfully waiting for the latest word from high above, regarding a possible future for that lesser authority, God.

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Even if we had not read it we could predict that Heidegger's essay can only bury the dramatic force of Nietzsche's madman under the crushing weight of its philosophical pedantry. And indeed it does. According to Heidegger the madman's announcement really means: "the end of the supra-sensible in the platonic sense."

After this breathtaking announcement you cannot expect from someone like Heidegger that he would take notice of something as insignificant as the collective murder of God. Obviously this is the type of rhetorical ornament that a thinker still superior to Nietzsche, one that has really gone beyond the supra-sensible in the platonic sense, should do well to avoid.

Heidegger wrote that, even though no specific god is mentioned, the only god to whom Nietzsche can and must allude is the Christian God. That last precision fits well with the rest of his essay. Even though Heidegger haughtily protests that his interpretation has nothing to do with the "vulgar atheism" that is so often read into this text, the difference is not always visible to me.

To speak primarily of "the death of God," apropos of this text, as Heidegger does, is to fall into the same trap as everybody before. All gods are "beings" (*seiende*) with a certain historical lifespan, and then they must die, unlike Being itself (*Sein*). Now that the twilight of the biblical God has finally come, similar to the twilight and death of the pagan gods before, Dionysus for instance, some entirely new gods may well show up in the future. Heidegger thought he could recognize his own thought in the text of *The Gay Science* but he was wrong. He would have been well advised, from his own standpoint, if he had distrusted that text to the same extent that he did *Dionysus versus the Crucified.* From the standpoint of modernistic orthodoxy, the one is as treacherous as the other.

But was Nietzsche's own thought really that different from Heidegger's especially in 1882? Explicitly perhaps, it was not, but in the writing of that text, when Nietzsche shifted from the death of God to his murder, he must have felt, as we all feel, the sudden enormous increase in the symbolical power at his disposal. It was like an unexpected gift from the gods, and Nietzsche was not the sort of writer who would refuse such a gift.

The fact that he made that shift from death to murder suggests that the real basis, the ultimate foundation for the later parallel and opposition between Dionysus and the Crucified was already a preoccupation of his, a preoccupation that rarely comes to the fore,

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it seems—a careful analysis might still show otherwise—but one that must have been quite pregnant with significance in order to generate such a great and enigmatic text as this collective murder of God.

The ultimate foundation of the collective murder of God is identical, of course, with that *martyrdom* of Dionysus which is recognized as identical to the *martyrdom* of Jesus in the fragment 1052 of *The Will to Power*. There is no difference between this dual insight and the definition of God's disappearance in our world as one more instance of that martyrdom. This does not mean that all these murders can really be equated to each other of course.

The same insight dominates the two texts we have read. And this insight is never more prominent in Nietzsche's mind than at the very instant before the final breakdown, when the formula: Dionysus *versus* the Crucified, is changed to Dionysus *and* the Crucified.

It cannot mean at this late stage that Nietzsche is turning into a positivist and that he gives up the difference that interpretation makes. But it certainly means that the difference for which he has been fighting is breaking down and collapsing back into the undifferentiation from which it had earlier emerged.

Aphorism 125 expresses the first undifferentiation, enormously creative and symbolically polyvalent in its reaching for the essential significance of the murder of God. If we believe, with Heidegger, that the Christian God alone is present in this text, we will never apprehend its enormous polyvalence. The text plays with the murder of God on several primary levels that tend to contaminate each other but can nevertheless be logically distinguished from one another.

The most obvious level is the modern disappearance of god as collective murder; a little behind comes the collective murder of the pagan gods as the generative power behind their existence, and way behind, the most difficult level of all, is the passion of Jesus that cannot be the death of the Christian God if the murders of the gods are always their birth but that could well be the death of all other gods in the banal sense we have in mind when we talk of "the death of God." It is not quite true, however, and these pagan gods "die hard," or rather they are perpetually reborn in works like Nietzsche's own.

What are we to do with such a maelstrom of collective murders? In order to make sure that the madman makes sense on more than

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one level, let us listen to someone who certainly is not mad, at least not in our current theoretical gospel, the great Sigmund Freud.

A few years after Nietzsche wrote *The Gay Science,* Freud discovered, he thought, that all "festivals of purification and atonement, all sacred games," all the religious rituals of mankind, are rooted in the collective murder of some real victim men call God. . . .

My readers are frowning. Yes, I know; that is not a text of Freud that should be quoted. Our great men do not think much of it. It is an exception. They really think that Freud was temporarily out of his mind when he wrote it, madly estranged from his own best work. And indeed he was like the madman of *The Gay Science.* He dared talk about that taboo subject, the collective murder of God. That is the only reason *Totem and Taboo* has been excommunicated and declared anathema. Just as there are non-persons nowadays, there are also non-books, that should never be mentioned, even when they seem to belong to the work of sacred authorities.

The aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science* has been treated very differently from *Totem and Taboo.* It has been enshrined and declared sacred. But this idolatry is really the other side of an excommunication and the result shows it. Nietzsche's statement on the collective murder of God is just as ignored as Freud's. The excommunication and the enshrinement are two opposite means to achieve the same end, which is to prevent any perception of a most enigmatic similarity between Freud and Nietzsche on the question of God. On everything else, these two texts are extremely distant from each other and their overlapping in respect to the fundamental theme of the collective murder of God should provide food for thought but it does not. Why?

Let us ask Nietzsche for the answer to that last question. He knows the answer very well. We are not yet ready, we are never ready for a real investigation of the subject:

> "I come too early," [the madman] said then; "my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering—it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—*and yet they have done it themselves.*"

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